DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 643 FL 022 076

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TITLE Developing Higher Cognitive Skills through Interpretive Writing.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Conference on Foreign Language Teaching (Kansas City, MO, April 21-24, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
LANGUAGE English; Spanish

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; Second Language Instruction; *Second Languages; Skill Development; Spanish; Spanish Literature; *Thinking Skills; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

One teacher's experience suggests that interpretive writing stemming from the reading and discussion of a literary work, in a second language, promotes development of higher-level cognitive skills. College students in an upper-division Spanish course in one institution are engaged in a writing process with three phases: preparatory; interpretive; and summative. The preparatory stage seeks to establish a common denominator of historical, linguistic, and cultural background for the reading. The interpretive phase allows students to express their own personal confrontation with the literary text, through writing about it. After reading and discussing modernist poetry by several Latin American authors, students write their own poem using specific modernist elements. After reading another text, students are asked to imagine themselves as a main character and write their own extension of events in the text. In other assignments, students are asked to contrast and compare perspectives on a problem posed in a text, assess authors' expressive techniques, and persuade others of their personal interpretation of a text. Examples of students' writing, all in Spanish, are included, with translations appended. A brief bibliography is also included. (MSE)

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Developing Higher Congnitive Skills Through Interpretive Writing

Author: Richard Dixon

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Introduction

Traditionally, writing in lower-division language courses has consisted mainly of fill-in-the blank exercises, answering questions, and occasional descriptive or narrative essays about personal topics. Though this approach has served its purpose at lower levels of second language proficiency; it has some drawbacks. "For one, all writing instruction is done at the sentence level. Then, attention is focused mostly on surface feature accuracy. Finally, this approach to writing draws from a linear cognitive process that requires very little development of thoughts or ideas." (Kern and Schultz 1992,p.2).

On the other hand, in higher-division language courses the approach to writing must draw from a higher cognitive process. "This process requires that students be able to examine a problem, evaluate evidence, generate and test hypotheses, and redefine those hypotheses according to new evidence and ideas." (Schultz 1991,p.412).

This higher cognitive process can be promoted by interpretive writing which stems from the reading and discussion of a given literary work. Interpretive writing requires that students develop, organize, and effectively express their own ideas and thoughts.

Purpose

This presentation seeks to demonstrate that interpretive writing stemming from the reading and discussion of a given literary work promotes the development of higher cognitive skills.

Rationale

This approach to writing has the following advantages:

1. It relates assignments to the course objectives.
2. It provides an abundant source of writing possibilities.
3. It develops a common denominator for all students that will prepare them to better read, discuss and write.
4. It allows students to incorporate their own perspective into the process of writing.

Limitations

The following basic limitations are true about this presentation:

1. Students enrolled in these classes have done their semester or year abroad or are about to study in a Hispanic country. The procedures here may not be possible with a group where students exhibit a lower level of language proficiency.
2. Taylor has a writing across the curriculum program. Students need to take two courses with a WR component as a graduation requirement. Students enroll in these courses expecting weekly writing assignments.
3. The presenter approaches the teaching of literature both as a means to linguistic proficiency and also for its aesthetic value. You may not agree with this approach.

Background

The presenter's treatment of literature is in concert with a methodology that is prevalent in many undergraduate programs today. Harper explains that the "approach consists of a three-phase sequence which is preparatory, interpretive and summative in scope." (1988,p.403). Establishing a common denominator is at the core of the preparatory stage. Kramsch asserts that this common denominator "must provide a historical, linguistic and cultural background that will enhance student's comprehension of what they read." (1988,p.359). Once students have read the literary text, it must be established whether comprehension has taken place or not. Steiner

reminds us that "students should know and be able to indicate precisely what the literary work is about." (1971-72,p.308). Now the students are ready to proceed to the interpretive phase. This phase permits students to express their own personal confrontation with the literary text. Carrell indicates that this confrontation "heightens interest, motivates students, protects self-esteem, and facilitates assimilation of the material read." (1984,p.333).

Pragmatics

The courses are not writing courses though they have a writing component in them. No pre-writing activities are held, as such, but the preparatory phase gives students a linguistic, cultural and historical background they wouldn't have otherwise. The interpretive sequence permits students to interact with the text via writing. This interaction could take other forms but in this presentation only writing will receive consideration. in the assessment of students' writing, all structural errors are corrected but the actual evaluation is determined by organization, coherence, ability to communicate and content. Students will do twelve writing assignments per course and most assignments will not exceed three hundred words.

Implementation

Anthony Spanos affirms that interpretive writing "must allow exploration," (1992,p.441,42) and interaction with poetry gives students an excellent opportunity to explore. After reading and discussing Modernistic poetry from several Latin American authors, students were asked to write their own poem. They were to include such Modernistic elements as dissatisfaction with one's present condition, a longing to escape to an exotic place, an excessive use of colors, musicality, and repetition to create an effect. The following poem contains Traci Di Christofano's interpretation of that.

«La separación»

Trato de escucharte pero no puedo oírte
Trato de tocarte pero no puedo sentirte.
Trato de verte pero no puedo encontrarte.
La separación,
La distancia,
¡Qué frío! ¡Qué oscuro!
Las flores han dejado de crecer.
Las golondrinas han dejado de cantar.
El sol ha dejado de brillar.
La separación,
La distancia,
¡Qué frío! ¡Qué oscuro!
Mis días son más largos.
Mis noches son más frías.
Mis lágrimas son más agrias.
La separación,
La distancia,
¡Qué frío! ¡Qué oscuro!
Las flores se están marchitando.
Las nubes están murmurando.
Los vientos están azotando.
La separación,
La distancia,
¡Qué frío! ¡Qué oscuro!
Horas de tristeza paso en mi soledad.
Días de dolor paso en mi soledad.
Noches de angustia paso en mi soledad.
La separación,
La distancia,
¡Qué frío! ¡Qué oscuro!

Adelson maintains that interpretive writing can include a certain amount of role playing (1988,p.15) and students' confrontation with LAZARILLO DE TORMES provides an excellent opportunity to do that. After reading and discussing this literary text, students were asked to imagine themselves being Lazarillo. As such, each student had to plot a revenge course against the blind master in retaliation for all his psychological and physical abuse as well as all the starvation suffered. Here is Jena Habegger's writing as if she were Lazarillo.

"Historia de una venganza"

Lo que este ciego me ha hecho sufrir no tiene ni nombre ni perdón. Sus insultos me han hecho sentir como tonto, inútil, y sin nadie en el mundo que se preocupe por mí. Sus castigos físicos me han dejado sin dientes y con cicatrices en la cara y otras partes del cuerpo. Lo que más odio es su idea de que yo no necesito comer. Esto me ha dejado muy, muy flaco. Como nadie quiere ayudarme, esto es lo que me propongo hacer para poner fin a este abuso. Lo primero que voy a hacer es cambiar la posición de los muebles en la casa varias veces al día. Como él no puede ver, se tropezará con ellos y se lastimará las piernas. Como él no sabe que yo soy el culpable de sus tropiezos, empezará a dudar de su coordinación y terminará con un ataque de nervios.

Después voy a ponerle grasa en el bastón y entonces cuando él camine por las calles se resbalará y se caerá muchas veces. De esta manera él experimentará en su carne y sus huesos el dolor que yo he experimentado en los míos. Si las dos experiencias primeras no lo hacen cambiar, yo lo haré experimentar algo mucho más humillante. Lo guiaré por la plaza a los lugares donde hay estiercol de caballo y lo haré caminar exactamente sobre eso. Lo haré hacer eso tantas veces hasta que él se arrodille en el mismo estiercol y me pida perdón. Ya que a él le gusta cocinar tanto con especias y a mí me permite oler pero no comer haré lo siguiente: Voy a cambiar el contenido del azucarero con sal, del salero con pimienta, del vinagre con mostaza y del café con harina. La próxima vez que él cocine ni él ni yo podremos comer. Finalmente, yo iré por todo el pueblo y les diré a todos los vecinos que él está loco y que está desarrollando un plan para envenenarlos a todos. Entonces, cuando ellos vengan para apresarlo, yo me fugaré y buscaré a otro amo.

Carrel and Connor state that "to be able to compare and contrast is also a function of interpretive writing." (1991,p.316). González-Prada and Martí present divergent perspectives about basic problems facing Latin Americans and Nathanael Tuggy's contrastive confrontation with both writers gives us some insight into that.

«El latinoamericano: sus problemas y soluciones»

Siempre ha sido una función de la literatura el analizar los problemas de la sociedad o de un país. Muchas veces, los autores no ofrecen soluciones a los problemas que apuntan. Sin embargo, González-Prada y Martí presentan problemas que ven en los latino-americanos y también ofrecen soluciones, pero ambas soluciones tienen problemas.

Manuel-González-Prada en su ensayo «El individuo» asevera que el latinoamericano necesita forjar su propio destino. Dice que ni el estado ni la iglesia debería controlarlo. Cree que el control de esas dos instituciones le impiden al individuo realizar lo máximo de su potencial. Es una idea basada en la creencia que el hombre lo puede todo a causa de su bondad inherente.

En «Nuestra América» José Martí mira al problema del latino-americano de una manera diferente. Su problema es que tiende a buscar la solución de su problemas imitando lo que han hecho otras naciones. Martí creía que porque la realidad latinoamericana era diferente crear soluciones propias era más importante que imitar a otros.

Aunque finalmente los dos presentan soluciones, habría problemas en la implementación de ambas. Las soluciones presuponen que todos los hombres son perfectos y que el bien es el fin de todas sus acciones. Es obvio que la anarquía que demanda Prada y la creatividad que sugiere Martí requieren una fe muy grande. Los dos autores tienen una fe enorme en la bondad inherente del latino-americano. Desafortunadamente, no es así y por eso las soluciones no solucionan nada.

Carrell and Conner believe that interpretive writing should provide an accessible channel for students to express their own opinions about the works they have read. (p.316). The following essay communicates Dorothy DeCamp's point of view on how José Asunción Silva uses the effect of color to communicate his feelings in his poem «Nocturno.»

José Asunción Silva usa el color como un elemento principal en la creación del tono del poema «Nocturno.» El color crea vivamente el contexto y las realidades externa e interna. Primero, los colores crean el contexto o el marco del poema. En el comienzo el marco está en la noche con «los cielos azulosos,» «luz blanca» y «sombras lánguidas.» Estos crean un efecto misterioso. El color blanco describe el frío y la nieve revela que es invierno. Segundo, los colores crean la realidad externa del poema. El «infinito negro» describe la separación entre José y su hermana en la muerte. En la muerte no hay vida, así no hay colores felices. Las blancuras de las mortuorias sábanas pintan un cuadro de la muerte también.

En mi opinión, los colores crean el efecto más fuerte en relación a la realidad interna. Ellos describen las emociones dentro del poeta. El «infinito negro» describe las «infinitas amarguras y agonías» que él siente en relación a la muerte de su hermana. También, el negro representa la vacuidad y la soledad de una vida sin ella. La nieve blanca simboliza no solamente el contexto del invierno y la realidad externa de las mortuorias sábanas, sino también la realidad interna de un corazón frío como la nieve. No hay nada de calor en el corazón de José porque toda su felicidad era su hermana.

Verdaderamente, José Asunción Silva ha creado el contexto y las realidades externa e interna del poema con el uso de los colores.

Also, Carrell and Conner picture intrepretive writing as a stage where students may seek to persuade others to share their own interpretion of a literary test. (p. 315). Jason Fortner attempts to persuade others that the poem «Los maderos de San Juan was not written for children.

En su corta vida José Asunción Silva contribuyó mucho al mundo de la poesía latinoamericana. Tuvo un estilo audaz que es muy visible especialmente en sus poemas que tratan sobre temas profundos como la muerte y la angustia humana. Uno de sus poemas más famosos es «Los maderos de San Juan." El coro de este poema se ha convertido en un verso muy favorito ya que muchos niños cantan «Aserrín, aserrán, los maderos de San Juan piden queso, piden pan, etc.» Es la musicalidad y facilidad de rima que hacen que muchos piensen que es un poema infantil. También piensan así porque habla de un niñito sentado en las rodillas de su abuela. Sin embargo, con un poco más de análisis se puede ver que el poema no fue escrito para niños.

Aunque la repitición de la parte musical del poema parece infantil, el resto trata de cosas demasiado serias y profundas para niños. El autor describe como la abuela se preocupa por el futuro de su nieto. Tiene miedo de lo que pasará cuando ella haya muerto. También describe la angustia y el dolor que ha sufrido ella y describe en detalle lo que parece ella en su muerte. Es obvio que estas cosas no son apropiadas para niños. Finalmente, el elemento de escape de este poema no podría ser entendido por un niño. El autor describe bien el futuro cuando la abuela ya haya muerto y ya esté en la tumba y como la canción que ella siempre le cantó al nieto le vendrá para recordarla a ella. Con ese pensamiento el autor vuelve a repetir el coro. Parece que la abuela cansada de los pensamientos mórbidos repite: «Aserrín aserrán, etc....» Este escape de la realidad deprimiente y los otros asuntos ya mencionados muestran que este peoma de José Asunción Silva fue escrito para adultos y no para niños.

Conclusión

As you have seen, writing interpretively requires that students be able to critically analize the literary text in order to develop, organize and express effectively their thoughts and ideas. If you teach literary works here is an opportunity for your students to better assimilate what they read and also an opportunity to develop higher cognitive skills through writing.

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APPENDIX
Translation of Student's Writings

Traci Di Christofano's Poem

I try to listen but I cannot hear you.
I try to touch you but I cannot feel you.
I try to see you but I cannot find you.
The separation.
The distance.
How cold! How dark!
Flowers are no longer blossoming
Swallows are no longer chirping
The sun is no longer shining.
The separation.
The distance.
How cold! How dark!
My days have become colder.
My nights have become longer.
My tears have become more bitter.
The separation.
The distance.
How cold! How dark!
Flowers are withering.
Clouds are murmuring.
Winds are slashing.
The separation.
The distance.
How cold! How dark!
Hours of sadness I spend in solitude.
Days of sorrow I spend in solitude.
Nights of anguish I spend in solitude.
The separation.
The distance.
How cold! How dark!

Theme written by Jena Habegger

What this blindman has made me suffer has no name and it cannot be forgiven. His insults have made feel like a fool, good-for-nothing, and without anybody in the world to look after me. His physical punishments have left me without any teeth and with scars in my face and other parts of my body. What I hate the most is his idea that I do not need to eat. That idea has left me very, very thin. Since nobody wants to help me, this is what I intend to do in order to put an end to this abuse. The first thing I am going to do is rearrange the furniture in the house several times

a day. Since he cannot see, he will trip himself on them and he will hurt his legs several times. Because he will not know that I am responsible for moving the furniture, he will begin to doubt his coordination and will end up with a nervous breakdown.

If that does not work, I am going to grease his cane. That way when he walks on the streets, it will be very slippery and he will fall down many times. This way, he will experience in his flesh and bones all the pain that I have experienced in my own. If the first two experiences do not make him change, I will make him experience something even more humiliating. I will guide him around the main square to the places where there is the most horse manure; and I will make him walk on it. I will make him do that so many times, until he kneels down in the manure itself and ask forgiveness. Since he enjoys so much using spices in his cooking, and he allows me to smell the food but not to eat it; I will do the following: I will fill the sugar bowl with salt, the salt shaker with pepper, the vinegar container with mustard, and the coffee container with flour. The next time he cooks something, neither he nor I will be able to eat it. Finally, I will go through town and I will tell everybody that he is insane and that he is developing a plan to poison all of us. Then, when they are coming to put him in jail, I will run away and will seek to serve another master.

Theme written by Nathanael Tuggy

It has always being the function of literature to analyze the problems of a society or a nation. Many times, authors do not offer solutions to the problems they point out. Nevertheless, Gonzáles-Prada and Martí point out problems that they see in Latin Americans and also offer solutions to solve them, but there are some fallacies found in these solutions.

Manuel Gonzalez-Prada in his essay, "El individuo," states that Latin Americans need to forge their own destiny. He asserts that neither the state nor the church should try to control them. He believes that extreme control from both state and church robs the individuals from fully developing their potential. His idea is based on the belief that man is able to accomplish anything because he is inherently good.

In "Nuestra América," José Martí looks at Latin America's problem differently. The problem for him lies in the fact that Latin Americans would seek to solve their problems by imitating other nations. Martí says that because the Latin American reality is different, it is more important to create one own's solution instead of imitating others.

Finally, even though both of them offered solutions, it would be very difficult to implement either one. Both solutions presuppose that all men are inherently good and that goodness is the outcome in everything they do. It is obvious that the anarchy demanded by González-Prada and the creativity suggested by Martí require much faith in humankind. Both authors have much faith in the inherent goodness

of Latin Americans. Unfortunately, it is not that way, therefore; the solutions offered do not solve anything.

Theme Written by Dorothy De Camp

José Asunción Silva uses color as a main element to communicate the tone of his poem "Nocturno." Color is also used to vividly create the context and the internal and external realities in the poem. First, color is used to create the context for the poem. At the beginning, the setting is described as the night with the "blue-like skies," "the white light," and "the languid shadows." These colors create an effect of mystery. The white color describes how cold it is and the snow reveals that it is winter. Second, color creates the external reality in the poem. The "infinite blackness" describes the separation between José and his sister in death. In death there is no life, so there is an absence of happy colors. The whiteness of the "funeral sheets" also paints an image of death.

In my opinion, color creates the strongest effect in relation to the internal reality. It describes the emotions within the poet. The "infinite blackness" describes the infinite bitterness and anguish" that he suffers in relation to his sister's death. Also, black represents the emptiness and solitude of a life without her. The white snow not only symbolizes the context of winter and the external reality of the "funeral sheets" but also the internal reality of a heart as cold as snow. There is no color left in José's heart because his sister was all his happiness and now she is gone. Truly, José Asunción Silva has created the context, the internal and external reality of the poem by using color.

Theme Written by Jason Fortner

In his short life, José Asunción Silva made a decisive contribution to the Latin American poetic scenery. He had a daring style which is visible especially in his poems which deal with somber themes such as death and human anguish. One of his most famous poems is "Los Maderos de San Juan." The chorus of this poem has become a favorite verse since many children sing "Aserrín, aserrán, los maderos de San Juan piden queso, piden pan, etc." It is its musicality and catchy rhyme that make many believe that it is a poem for children. They hold that view, also, because it portrays a child sitting on his grandmother's lap. In spite of that, with a little bit of careful analysis, it is not difficult to see that this poem is not for children.

Even though the repetition of the poem's musical chorus seems aimed at children, the rest of the poem deals with deep and serious matters that do not pertain to children. The poet describes how the grandmother worries about her grandchild's future. She is afraid of what is going to happen when she dies. The poet also discusses the human pain and anguish she has suffered in life and also describes her in death. It is obvious that children do not think about these experiences, but adults do. Finally, the escape element developed by the poet could not be understood by

a child. He describes the future when the grandmother is already dead and then shows how the song she sang to him will come back to help him remember her. With that in mind, the poet repeats the chorus by which the child will remember her. It seems then that the grandmother becomes depressed by the horrible thoughts and then escapes from them by repeating "Aserrín, aserrán, etc." This escape from a depressing reality and the other considerations show us clearly that José Asunción Silva did not write this poem for children but for adults.